

EMPIRE AND HEGEMONY

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The Greek “hegemony” and Chinese “ba” originally had similar meanings. Later, extreme moralization stripped “ba” of the sense of eminence and reduced the hegemon to an immoral brute. Because “ba” is now pejorative, “American hegemony” invokes an a priori negative image in Chinese eyes.

The image of empire, once glorious, was tarnished in the post-war wave of decolonization. Although it regained some luster after the American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, many Americans still find it distasteful. Thus even as some talks of the American Empire,¹ others, such as candidate George W. Bush, declared: “America has never been an empire.” Instead of empire, they talk of world leadership, or, in more academic terms, hegemony². The United States is “the sole example of geopolitical hegemony since the fall of Rome,” writes the historian of economics Patrick O’Brien. “Since Rome only the government of the United States has set out to formulate and enforce rules for the operational of an international system and utilized its considerable military, naval, economic and cultural resources to command, implicitly coerce and/or persuade other states to abide by these rules.”³

From the People’s Republic of China, which is fast rising in global geopolitics, people have another view. Yan Xuetong, a leading international-relations scholar, scoffs at the notion of America hegemony or “benevolent empire” as “cosmetic propaganda,” because it is “unable to propose a concept of international benevolent authority corresponding to hegemonic power.”⁴ Just as westerners refer to ancient Rome, the Chinese refer to ideas from the time before the unification of China, the time coincided with the Roman Republic. At that time, China was divided into many antagonistic states. Practices in inter-state relations produced the empirical notions of the hegemon, *ba* 霸 and the king, *wang* 王. Since then, extreme moralization has made *ba* and *wang* into ideological notions that are polar opposites. In the ideological sense, Yan notes that “the core difference between the two was in morality” and proposes “kingly way” *wangdao* for today’s international relations.

In the West, the notion of hegemony that originated from the practice of the ancient Greeks carried an intrinsic sense of moral authority. In terms of morality and political function, its connotations were similar to that of the empirical notion *ba*. Thus “hegemony” is translated as “*ba*”. However, whereas the classical sense of hegemony persists in the West, the notion of *ba* in China had undergone a dramatic degradation in the hands of ideological Confucians and come to mean an immoral brute. The ideological sense has stuck. Thus, whereas American hegemony meaning a benevolent empire makes sense in the West, it appears to be an oxymoron in Chinese eyes.

This article tries to examine the empirical meanings of “empire”, “hegemony”, “*wang*” and “*ba*”, together with the evolution of their meanings. Perhaps it can reduce confusion and misunderstanding.

Political functions

The empirical notions produced in historical inter-state relations have both moral and political functional meanings. The king is a ruler of people, the hegemon is a leader of allies. Each have certain moral standards in discharging their political functions. Strictly speaking, the king’s main job is in internal government. However, this paper is mainly on international relations. Thus we shall focus on foreign policies, especially the domination of other peoples and occupation of other’s territories, in other words, the king’s *imperium*, empire.

What is an empire? None of the common notions of *empire* fits all of the 68 empires found in the *Times Atlas of World History*. An empire is ruled by an emperor, but the Athenian Empire was ruled by a democracy and Rome’s empire was acquired under the Republic. An empire implies domination, in which a state controls other peoples or communities to its own advantage, whether or not decorated by altruistic rouge. However, for most periods during its long history, imperial China made almost no political distinction among its denizens, nor did the Roman Empire after 212, when all free inhabitants became citizens. An empire is a territorial state that can be colored red or blue on a map. However, dominion can obtain without direct rule, as the Roman control of the Hellenistic world in the second century BCE, the Chinese control of its Western Territory during the Han Dynasty, or the British control of India before the 1858 annexation.

Today, when we talk of empires, we most readily think of territorial entities, which imply occupation and annexation. It is in this narrow sense that many deny America to be an empire, as President Bush said in his 2003 Missions Accomplished speech right after American troops took Bagdad: “Other nations in history have fought in foreign lands and

remained to occupy and exploit. Americans, following a battle, want nothing more than to return home.” For domination and control without annexation, some people talk about “informal empire”, “benevolent empire”, or hegemony.

Hegemon and imperium

A Greek *hegemon* was originally the supreme commander of a willing alliance. A prime example was the Athenian leadership in the Greek alliance against Persia in the first part of the fifth century BCE. The Athenians said they fought for security, honor, and self-interest.⁵ Greek historians noted the significance of honor in the initial competition for hegemony, when Athens yielded to Sparta for the good of the anti-Persian alliance and assumed leadership only after Sparta abdicated. Thus *hegemon* did convey some sense of eminence and moral authority in leadership.⁶ This is also apparent in Aristotle’s condition of just war: “to put us in a position to exercise leadership [*hegemon*] – but leadership directed to the interest of those who are ruled, and not to the establishment of a general system of slavery.”⁷

As the power of Persia declined, the power of Athens rose. Secured from common foreign threats, self-interest came to overwhelm honor in Athenian considerations. By brute force backed by a mighty navy, Athens forbade withdrawal from its “alliance” and compelled others to join. It did not annex “allies,” but imposed its own form of government on them, transferred local lawsuits to Athens, extracted tributes to fund its own public projects including the grand buildings on the Acropolis, militarily protected its citizens to grab land in ally territories, and built up the Athenian Empire, which lasted for five decades until the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE.⁸ The Athenian attitude in interstate relations, as depicted in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*, expressed a stark realism epitomized by the vulgarized version of the Athenian remark to the Melians: “The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must.”⁹

Not surprisingly, the subject city-states hated the domination and called Athens a *polis tyrannos*. The Athenians knew this. When rebellions occurred, the great democratic leader Pericles exhorted citizens to hang tough: “there is also involved the loss of our empire and the dangers arising from the hatred which we have incurred in administering it. . . . Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go.”¹⁰

Observing the change in Athenian behaviors, Greek historians withdrew the epithet *hegemon* and instead used *arche* for the Athenian Empire. *Arche* generally meant rule, mainly the government of a state, and the absence of rule is *an-archia*. Anarchy is the condition of most

international arenas, but not all. Two marked exceptions are *arche* and *hegemon*, which we call empire and hegemony.¹¹ Note that although *arche* lacks the sense of eminence in *hegemon*, it is a neutral term distinct from the pejorative *polis tyrannos*. Whether an empire is tyrannical or benevolent depends on the manner of its domination.

Political territories, depicted as patches of color on the map, seem concrete, but that is the concreteness in an abstract representation. Things are different on the ground; think about how porous many national boundaries are, even in today's world. Power, the capacity to make others comply with one's desires, has no definite shape but is concrete in cognitive relations. Even animals understand the meaning of teeth bared or tails tucked. It is doubtful that a lion spraying landmarks has the notion of reigning over a territory, but its assertion of power is not lost on potential intruders.

Power can be gained by military might. Maintenance of power requires proper administration. The dominating power can rule indirectly through agents or directly by annexing the territory. The problems of conquest and of rule are not mutually exclusive, but neither should they be conflated. To defeat the enemy is often much easier than to rule the conquered populace, as is demonstrated by the conditions in Iraq after President Bush's Missions Accomplished speech. The Chinese of the warring states knew this well, as the general Wu Qi wrote, "to be victorious is easy, to preserve the fruits of victory difficult."¹² That was why they often resorted to hegemony, alliance, and other means to maintain interstate balance of power. Qin refrained from swallowing its six rivals for a long time. Massive annexation to create a unified China occurred within a decade, and the rapidity was a major cause of its downfall. The Roman Republic was an avid expansionist in power but less avid in expanding territory; it preferred indirect rule under many circumstances. For this reason, some modern writers call the Republic's relation with Hellenistic states "hegemonial imperialism."¹³ The qualification would be superfluous for the Romans. "Empire" derives from the Roman *imperium*. As supreme experts in control, the Romans had include both senses of power domination and territorial occupation in *imperium*. Their overseas diplomacy usually consisted of an ultimatum of harsh terms from the Senate, often without prior negotiations, with the message that if the recipient did not wish to obey, they could expect a war with Rome. The legions came, won, systematically looted, and retreated. The victim learned to obey Rome's *imperium*.¹⁴

What Livy and other Latin writers called *imperium*, the Greek Polybius, the first historian to record Rome's rise to empire, rendered as *arche*.¹⁵ *Imperium* originally meant command, especially the supreme power of the Roman magistrates. The *imperium populi Romani* meant the sway or supremacy of the Romans over other peoples.¹⁶ It connoted power. Not until the

mid first century BCE did a clear territorial connotation appear and *imperium Romanum* begin to take on the meaning of the Roman empire as we understand it today, a polity with delimited territory divided into regional provinces directly ruled by Rome or the emperor.¹⁷ Even then the domineering connotation persisted, as in Rome's claim of *imperium orbis terrae*, power or mastery over the whole world, which extended beyond its provinces.¹⁸

The above analysis reveals *functional* and *moral* distinctions in talks about hegemony and empire. In terms of political function, hegemony means leadership and indirect control without territorial implication, while empire can mean either indirect control or the direct rule of annexed territories. In terms of moral quality, empire seems to be neutral, while hegemony originally implies preeminence; greatness lies less in great power than in the self-restraint in exercising it, as a superior leader wins loyalty less by coercive force than by moral authority. Both functional and moral distinctions are present in the empirical Chinese notions of *wang* and *ba*.

The empirical notion of *ba*

The five centuries prior to unification in 221 BCE were most important for Chinese thoughts in international relations, not only because it was the time of Confucius and other masters that produced the canons of Chinese classics. The fragmentation into many contending states of equal status necessitated innovations for maintaining the balance of power. The centuries divide about equally into two periods. The first was traditionally known as the Spring and Autumn period. At its beginning, over a thousand city-sized states coexisted, which would gradually coalesce into a handful of contiguous territorial “warring states,” for which the second period is named. The states frequently went to war, against each other or against intruding pastoralists from the hills and grasslands.¹⁹ The interstate situation somehow resembled the contemporary Greek world with its hundreds of belligerent city-states, or the early Roman Republic among numerous polities in Italy.

This was the period of the *ba* 霸 or hegemon. *Ba* was also called *bo* 伯, the eldest brother among lords. A *ba* was a leader of lords who rallied lesser states, presided over interstate conferences, arbitrated disputes, upheld some norms of behavior, demanded tribute and military levy, commanded allied troops against common enemies, and interfered in limited internal affairs of other states.²⁰ He had more civilian roles than the Greek *hegemon*, but the idea of a preeminent interstate leader was similar.

The first *ba*, Lord Huan of Qi, arose at a time of external threats. Under his leadership the lords of various states gathered fifteen times. In military campaigns, they repelled pastoralist

invasions and reconstituted overrun states. In diplomatic conferences, they made covenants about things such as forbidding crooked levees or restriction of grain sales.²¹ For example, a fierce pastoralist invasion in 660 BCE destroyed the state of Wei, leaving only hundreds of survivors. Lord Huan sent an army to drive off the pastoralist and gather several allies to build a new city for Wei, which was able to recover.²² After Qi declined, the contest for hegemony between Jin and Chu became the motif of interstate relations that accounted for most wars in a century.

Looking back from the late warring-state period, the Confucian master Xunzi wrote: “*Wang* (the king) strives to win people, *ba* (the hegemon) strives to win allies, *qiang* (the strong) strives to win territories.” The first two are virtuous, “the prevalence of *yi* (義 righteousness or justice) makes a king, the prevalence of *xin* (信 trustworthiness) makes a hegemon.” The strong who relies only on military might is in great peril.²³

In terms of political function, Xunzi’s *wang* and *ba* resemble empire and hegemony. The king who wins people usually rules directly, but territorial reign is not the major consideration. In terms of morality, the king’s virtue is explicitly emphasized and extolled, which distinguishes him from the morally neutral empire. The king and the hegemon exemplify different virtues to suit their different political functions. Nevertheless, they both have moral authority, which set them apart from the strongman, a semblance of the *polis tyrannos*.

The Greek *hegemon* fought for honor. Much honor resides in keeping one’s promises and maintaining one’s integrity and trustworthiness. Thus the Romans strived to keep faith with their allies, as Cicero wrote, “The foundation of justice is good faith, in other words truthfully abiding by our words and agreements.”²⁴ Like the Roman *fides*, the Chinese *xin* never ceased to be an ideal. Much was grandiloquent and failures were legion. Nevertheless, for a long period the two peoples did try hard to keep up a reputation of good faith. The extend Romans went to keep oaths was legendary. Hannibal released ten Roman prisoners as representatives to negotiate terms of ransom upon the oath that they return. After Rome refused to ransom its war captives, nine of the ten went back to face slavery. The tenth, who previously returned to pick up something, tried to trick his way out but were sent back under public guards.²⁵ Such stories from Roman and Chinese literatures could be multiplied. When Lord Huan of Qi first bid for hegemony, a Lu minister in a diplomatic meeting held him at dagger point and demanded the return of Lu lands that Qi took in previous wars. He agreed but, furious afterwards, wanted to renege. His chief minister Guan Zhong, whose help was instrumental to his hegemony, admonished: “No. If you grab small advantages for self-gratification and

abandon trustworthiness with the lords, you will lose the world's support. Return the lands." He did.²⁶

To err is human. One can readily find great faults with eminent political leaders. Nevertheless, the empirical notions of *ba* and *hegemon* convey an aspiration to do the right thing, whether practices live up to that aspiration. This aspiration lives in the notion of American hegemony as a benevolent empire. Chinese of the Spring and Autumn period would understand. However, today's Chinese would be baffled, because the notion of *ba* had been demonized.

The ideological notions of WANG and BA

Confucius often discussed the hegemonies with his disciples. He praised the hegemonic deeds of Lord Huan and Guan Zhong for protecting the people and bequeathing benefits for ages to come.²⁷ In contrast, Mengzi claimed that Lord Huan and other hegemon were so despicable they were below discussion, and were never discussed in Confucian schools. He poured scorn on Guan Zhong and bristled at hearing people's praises for him.²⁸

Confucius respected historical facts and was comfortable with the empirical notions of *ba* and *wang*. Mengzi brushed aside facts and the empirical notions. In their place he introduced the ideological notions *BA* and *WANG*: "WANG dispenses benevolence with virtue, *BA* appropriates benevolence by force."²⁹ Political functions are disregarded. The only criterion is morality, on which the two sit at extremes opposing each other: *WANG* monopolizes morality, *BA* is immoral.³⁰

The Greek historians withdrew the sterling epithet *hegemon* for Athens because of its changed behavior. In contrast, Confucius and Mengzi were concerned with the same actions of Lord Huan and other historical hegemonies, only Mengzi raised the moral bar to degrade them in one broad brush. Mengzi's judgment was subjective and dogmatic. Lord Huan had won the support of allies and the gratitude of the people, but Mengzi condemned him anyway because of their allegedly incorrect motives. On the other hand, he extolled ancient sage kings as paradigms of the benevolent *WANG*, disregarding as false evidence of their cruel deeds.

Mengzi's anti-hegemon stance is based on his anti-utility doctrine. He made righteousness and utility into polar extremes and regarded any consideration of beneficial utility hazardous to the state.³¹ Unlike Xunzi, who appreciated the importance of political-institutional, economic, and military factors in interstate relation, Mengzi blamed them for being forceful

and interfering with benevolence. He advocated punishing generals, diplomats, and officers leading land reclamation and distribution.³² The sage king is not contaminated by utilitarian considerations, his pure benevolence would attract people like children to their father. Morality suffices.³³ Mengzi's mantra for government and interstate relations is: "The benevolent is invincible."³⁴

Mengzi was the fourth generation disciple of Confucius. Chronologically, he came between Confucius and Xunzi. In the Confucian Orthodoxy, he is the sage second only to the master, while the realistic Xunzi does not even have a seat. Mengzi's writing was one of the Four Books that became the standard text for the imperial civil service examination. His ideology of extreme moralization gained influence as Confucian officers dominated the imperial bureaucracy. Following Mengzi's teaching, the hegemon came to be identified as an immoral bully who knows only force. To the Chinese ear, American hegemony sounds anything but euphemistic.

Mengzi's ideology of the benevolent *WANG* was effective in the moral propaganda by which imperial Confucian officers clobbered opponents and bolstered their own power. If it were more substantive, it might be compared to the Cold-War era ideologies of Liberalism and Communism. In terms of government and policy making, vacuity and impracticality are its perennial criticisms.

While serving as high minister in the state of Qi, Mengzi applied the ideology of *WANG* in the policy recommendation for Qi's annexation of Yan. It proved to be a fiasco as great as the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. A succession crisis plunged the state of Yan into internal turmoil. Qi wanted to take advantage of it. Mengzi invented a moral reason for invasion as flimsy as Saddam Hussein's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. Qi took Yan as easily as America took Iraq. Qi regarded it as heaven's decree while America thought its mission accomplished. Mengzi conjured up an image of Yan people welcoming Qi troops with food and drink, just as the Iraqis were said to dance in the street in celebration of liberation. Based on Qi's alleged winning over of Yan's people, Mengzi urged Qi's king to emulate the paradigms of *WANG* and annex Yan. He invoked "people's hearts" as often as Americans talked about winning the hearts and mind of the Iraqis, but neither cared to find out what the people really wanted. At that time in China, seven warring states were playing a delicate game of balance of power, just as the Middle East was a delicate international theater. However, Mengzi never considered the possible reactions of the other states in urging annexation, just as America failed to fully appreciate the ramifications of the invasion on the Middle East. It was no surprise that the other five warring states responded by invading Qi to save Yan. Qi occupied Yan for only two years, but its reluctant withdrawal did not diminish

Yan's hatred. Yan's revenge attack would plunged Qi into a terminal decline.³⁵ Can the WANG ideology play a constructive role in today's international relations?

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- ³ P. K. O'Brien, The Pax Britannica and American Hegemony, in P. K. O'Brien and A. Clesse eds., *Two Hegemonies*. Ashgate (2002), pp. 27, 37.
- ⁴ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton University Press (2011), p. 65. The translator choses the peculiar phrase "humane authority" for *wang* 王, p. ix. I revert to the standard translation of "king" to avoid confusion.
- ⁵ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.
- ⁶ J. Wickersham, *Hegemony and Greek Historians*. Rowman and Littlefield (1994), pp. 4, 20. Münkler *Empires*, pp. 43-4.
- ⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 1333b, 1333a-1334a.
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- ⁹ Thucydides 5.89.
- ¹⁰ Thucydides 2.63, 3.37.
- ¹¹ O. Höffe, *Aristotle*. SUNY (2003), p. 178. Wickersham, *Hegemony and Greek Historians*, pp. 1-23, 31-36.
- ¹² *Wuzi* 《吳子兵法》 1.
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- ¹⁵ Polybius, 1.1. Kallet-Marx, *Hegemony to Empire*, pp. 22-3, 26-7.
- ¹⁶ Kallet-Marx, *Hegemony to Empire*, pp. 25-27
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- ²² *Zuozhuan*, Min 2, 《左傳》閔公 2 年。
- ²³ *Xunzi*, 9 Wangzhi, 11 Wangba. 《荀子·王制, 王霸》. Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, Chapter 2.
- ²⁴ Cicero, *Obligation* 1.23.
- ²⁵ Livy, 22.61.
- ²⁶ *Shiji*, 86: 2515-2516. 《史記》卷 86, 曹沫傳。
- ²⁷ *Lunyu* 14.17. 《論語·憲問》. *Shiji* 47: 1910 《史記》卷 47.
- ²⁸ *Mengzi* 1.7, 3.1. 《孟子·梁惠王上, 公孫丑上》.
- ²⁹ *Mengzi* 3.3 《孟子·公孫丑上》.
- ³⁰ Xu Jin, The two poles of Confucianism. In Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, pp. 172-4, 178-9.
- ³¹ *Mengzi* 1.1. 《孟子·梁惠王上》. B. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Harvard (1985), pp. 260-1.
- ³² *Mengzi* 7.14. 《孟子·離婁上》.
- ³³ Xu, The Two Poles of Confucianism, pp. 170-173.
- ³⁴ *Mengzi* 1.5, 1.18, 2.5, 3.10, 4.7, 7.49, 7.50.
- ³⁵ Sunny Auyang, Mengzi's political thought as revealed in his policy recommendations for Qi's annexation of Yan, www.chinaandrome.org/Chinese/essays/qi.htm.